
Roots of budget crisis in union politicking

SAN ANTONIO — If uniformed officers in San Antonio don't start contributing more to their own health care, public safety costs could consume the entire city budget by 2040.

How did we get here?

Instead of peering anxiously into the future, let's look back to 1988. That year, the city allowed the San Antonio Police Officers Association, a political powerhouse, to score the richest benefits package in Texas.

How rich? In May 1989, a newspaper headline read: "Police officers across state flock to S.A."

"Police departments across the state are experiencing a 'brain drain' as some of their best and brightest officers flock to San Antonio in search of greener pastures," the article states. "The reason? The recent contract hammered out between the San Antonio Police Officers' Association and the city of San Antonio that makes the San Antonio Police Department the envy of the state."

If the verb "hammered" implies an arduous process, that's an overstatement. To former councilman Weir Labatt, the only member to vote against it, the 96-page document slipped smoothly into being.

"It was a complete railroad," Labatt said on Friday. "It was so well-orchestrated, and both unions had a very close relationship with both Mayor (Henry) Cisneros and (former District 4 councilman) Frank Wing."

The late Wing, who was in a relationship with a policewoman at the time, helped draft parts of the

contract. And Cisneros reportedly had a reason to play nice with the police union and its brash, powerful president, Harold Flammia.

According to a former high-ranking city official at the time, Cisneros “wanted to get the two unions' support for the Alamodome election, which was coming up four months later, so he persuaded the staff to go ahead and get the contract done.

“There were a lot of giveaways added to the cost,” the former official said.

Cisneros did not return a request for comment on Friday.

Former City Manager Lou Fox called the process “political.”

“There was a lot of interaction from the union pushing the city council members to approve what was a higher contract cost than what the staff had recommended,” Fox said. “I think (Cisneros) got a lot of change in the way the council members felt.”

The council ended up approving a four-year, \$17 million contract. Later, the public learned someone had underestimated the cost by more than \$27 million; its cumulative cost was an eye-popping \$49,755,177.

In his 1997 book “Mayor,” Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff describes the contract better than I could; he was there, voting for it on council.

It “made our police officers the highest paid in the state,” he wrote. “It short-circuited the normal budget process by specifying major new expenditures for equipment.... It established a pre-funded medical plan for current and retired police officers, with contributions from both the officers and the city.

“It provided triple-time-and-a-half pay for work on holidays and added a sixth holiday to the overtime schedule. It included longevity pay increases, a generous incentive program for officers to pursue higher education and a pay differential for assignment to undesirable shifts.”

As the actual cost of the contract emerged, “it was also revealed that the projected contributions to the pre-funded medical plan may have created a monstrous unfunded future liability for the city,” Wolff wrote.

Labatt recalled that the “real issue” was health care.

“A lot of that additional cost centered around health care,” he said. “It all originated from the '88 contract, and it hasn't been on sound footing since then.... It's very hard to chip away at something once someone gets something.”

The unions should prepare for some chipping.

City officials, including City Manager Sheryl Sculley, begin negotiations with the police and fire unions in March. And it's Sculley's job to peer anxiously into the future.

“This will bankrupt the city in the future if we don't do something about it,” she said on Friday. “And we need to start addressing it today.”

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